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SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICAN ACADEMICS ASSESS 2009 ELECTION; LOOK
AHEAD

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) South African scholars agree that the 2009 election was one of the country's most important elections and argue the character and results of the poll hold clues to the future. At a seminar on July 21 to launch the newly published book, "Zunami: The 2009 South African Election," some of the country's leading thinkers began the process of understanding the outcome of the most recent poll and what it means for the future. Academics argued the election has made the African National Congress (ANC) a tentative organization and the Democratic Alliance (DA) "too confident." They postulated what emerged from the most recent election will have a significant impact on the 2011 local elections and beyond. End Summary.

South African Thinkers Look Back, Make Tentative Projections

¶2. (SBU) South Africa's academic community is beginning to place the 2009 election into context while tentatively looking ahead to the 2011 local elections. At a seminar on July 21 to launch a newly published book, some of the country's leading thinkers began the process of understanding the outcome of the most recent poll and what it means for the future. University of Witwatersrand political scientist Daryl Glaser opened the seminar by saying that in many ways the 2009 election is the most important poll that South African has ever held. He postulated that there have been "few benchmarks as meaningful to understanding democracy" as the most recent vote. University of Witwatersrand sociologist Roger Southall, University of Witwatersrand political scientist Anthony Butler, University of Cape Town's Zwelethu Jolobe, South African Institute of International Affairs researcher Tseou Petlane, and Rhodes University professor Jane Duncan followed Glaser's address, exploring all aspects of the election.

¶3. (SBU) Southall's most significant contribution was pointing out, as Colette Schulz-Herzenberg has noted, how the 2009 election demonstrated clearly that voters are willing to vote for different parties at national, provincial, and local levels. He said, "This trend will have huge implications for 2011." Butler followed Southall and argued the ANC will be forever changed by this election. He noted the decision by

some to break from the party to form the Congress of the People (COPE) did not change the ANC. He elaborated that how the ANC elected to respond to the new organization changed the character of the party. He said, "At first we saw COPE gain momentum through ANC's missteps. Once the ANC in the final months before the election took the strategy of caution, quiet, and avoidance of missteps, COPE was weakened." He argued that such a strategy has lingered past the election and has come to characterize the early days of the Jacob Zuma government. Butler said, "For better or worse, what we have is a very tentative government -- one even more tentative than administrations of the past. Where we need leadership, we have silence." He argued the new power blocs within the ANC are unclear. He noted, "The blocs are even unclear to ANC members themselves." He finished his Qare even unclear to ANC members themselves." He finished his remarks by saying that ahead of the local elections, one cannot ignore the fact that Zuma's popularity diminishes as one moves from East to West in the country. Butler quipped, "In a few years more in Eastern Cape may tire from the leadership of the ANC."

¶4. (SBU) Butler provided a perfect introduction to Jolobe's remarks as the University of Cape Town lecturer opened by discussing the DA's performance in Western Cape. Jolobe noted the DA is unlikely to face a real challenge from the ANC in Western Cape for years to come. However, he said the DA has been too confident post-election. He noted that such confidence led to Helen Zille appointing predominately white males to senior party positions and to "unfortunate" comments about Zuma. Jolobe believes that the DA's confidence post-election has made it difficult for the party to look at hard issues such as race, party leadership, and the possibility of governing alliances. He surmised the DA will grow in the short term -- winning significant seats in the

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local elections and perhaps even 20 percent in the next national election -- but will not get bigger over the longer term. He said, "There will be a cap, and then the party will be forced to pursue more coalitions." Going forward, Jolobe foresees the DA being in a better electoral position than COPE.

¶5. (SBU) Petlane argued, as many commentators have done post-election, that the 2009 election marked the end of "ideological parties." He noted, "What we learned is that we are not Europe. There will not be a Green Party to carry us forward or a party devoted only to a single community." He said the election results showed clearly that parties like the Minority Front may endure but "are not the future of South African politics." Duncan contended a reason for ideological parties fading in this election was the lack of depth by the media to look at "real issues and not just personalities." She related that the "South African voter wants issues but rarely gets them highlighted."

Comment

¶6. (SBU) There is no question the 2009 election was important. However, it also will be important how political parties -- and the South African public -- evolve over the next two years. The ANC's so-called tentativeness must end in order for voters to see improved service delivery and more effective administration from government departments. The DA's "confidence" must become effective, diverse leadership that can tackle societal issues in Western Cape and Parliament. Finally, COPE must seek ways to build momentum -- and unity -- in a way independent of ANC statements or missteps. If the South African voter evolves at a faster pace than the political parties seeking to represent them, which may happen if the voting trends hold, the 2011 elections may be the most important polls yet in determining this country's future.

